Elizabethan fashion is far different from what we wear today. Usually the only fashion talked about, as it was the only fashion to appear in paintings, is that of the upper class. There were several trends in fashion at the time, like slashing clothes to show contrasting fabrics underneath. As there was a newfound interest in geometry and shapes, most of the fashions of the day resembled different unflattering shapes. Beyond the trends, there were many rules about what people could wear. These rules were very strict, and disregarding them could result in fines, jail time, and even death. While lesser nobles could wear fox and otter skins, ermine fur was restricted to the royal family. Gold fabrics were permitted for the Queen’s family and high ranking nobles, but it was forbidden for those of or below the rank of Viscountess or baroness.

Many materials and fabrics were imported for use in Elizabethan clothing. These included furs, satin, silk, velvet, cotton, lace and taffeta. Many of these fabrics were brought back by crusading Knights centuries before. Another expensive import was the dye used to create the vivid colors the upperclassmen preferred.

Everything about Elizabethan fashion was over-the-top. This is the one era in which it was common for men to out dress their female counterparts. Jewels, spangles, and pearls were often used to decorate their outfits, pieces of outfits were often pinned together, and the upper classes wore comfortable clothing only in the privacy of their bedrooms.


The Elizabethan judicial system was broken into two parts: the crimes and punishments of the nobility, and those of the commoners. These two groups of people committed very different crimes, but the torture they suffered at the hands of those in charge was very much the same. The usual crimes committed by the nobility include high treason (betraying the king or queen), blasphemy (speaking against God), sedition (calling for rebellion against the Crown), Espionage (spying), murder, witchcraft, and alchemy (trying to find eternal life). Nobles who committed any of these crimes were usually tortured, then either hung, beheaded, or burnt at the stake. Commoner crimes included theft, begging, adultery, forgery and fraud. Commoners were much more likely to be killed for their crimes than their noble counterparts, though both were usually tortured.

Torture techniques varied widely during Elizabethan times, and women and children were not exempt. Some simple but painful techniques include whipping, branding, and pressing with heavy rocks, boiling in hot oil, public starvation, dismemberment, and time in the stockade. Some of the more complicated and more painful methods include being stretched on the rack, compressed with the Scavenger’s Daughter, or encased in the Iron Maiden, which was a life-size mummy case lined with spikes.

The worst punishment, however, was reserved for the worst criminals. Those criminals who betrayed their country were hung, drawn, and quartered. This execution consisted of hanging the victim until they were nearly dead, disemboweling them and cutting off their genitals or breasts, and then, while they were still alive, tying their arms and legs to 4 horses and sending them in different directions, resulting in the victim being ripped apart. Once dead, the 4 quarters of their body were sent to the 4 corners of England, and their head was placed on a spike as a warning to others. Needless to say, treason was not a crime you would want to be accused of.

The Elizabethan court system was blood thirsty and hungry for carnage. The biggest problem however, was that if even accused, a victim would be tortured, and since most people will confess to anything under torture, once you were accused of a crime, you rarely escaped execution (“Elizabethan Crime”).

Tonight We’re Going to Party Like It’s 1599

Elizabethan England was the center of party time, at least for those rich enough to afford it. Music was an essential at every party, and dances were coordinated and meticulous. Many instruments were used including the viol (a violin), the hautboy (an oboe), and the spinet and harpsichord (keyboards) (“Music”). The only thing more important at a party than the music was the food. Elizabethans enjoyed huge banquets of pheasant, mutton (lamb), and peacock, served with great helpings of fruit and vegetables, blood puddings, pastries and pies. Since water was not always clean, wine and mead (ale with honey) were the staple drinks (“Food”).

When they weren’t partying, Elizabethans liked to play sports and go to the theatre. For sports, wrestled, fenced, gambled, and hunted fox with a pack of dogs. Otherwise, they went to the theatre to see various plays written by playwrights such as William Shakespeare and Christopher Marlowe (“Sports”).

THE GLOBE THEATRE

The Globe Theatre is probably one of the most famous theatres in the world, but it has existed in four different forms over the last 432 years (“Shakespeare’s Globe”). The first Globe theatre was only called “The Theatre” and was built by James Burbage. William Shakespeare’s acting company, The Lord Chamberlain’s Men, performed in the London theatre from 1576-1597. Then their lease ran out, and Giles Allen, their landlord, was going to tear the building down. However, in the middle of the night, on December 28, 1597, Shakespeare and his men took apart the theatre and rebuilt it just outside the city limits. They named this new theatre “The Globe” and performed in it until 1613, when they accidentally burned it down. During a performance of King Henry VIII, a cannonball set the thatched roof on fire. The company spent nearly three years rebuilding it, and finished just before Shakespeare’s death in 1616. In 1642 the Puritans tore the theatre down because they believed plays were the work of the devil. They tore it down two years later and it stayed that way for 352 years until the foundation was rediscovered in 1989. Construction of the new Globe began in 1993 and was completed in 1996. On June 12, 1997, Queen Elizabeth II officially opened the new Globe Theatre (“Shakespeare’s Globe”).

THE BLACK DEATH

The bubonic plague was the deadliest disease the world has ever known. In just five years, the plague managed to wipe out 1/3 of Europe’s total population- that’s 25 million people! The plague started in the early 1330s in China among rats, and the fleas that fed on the rats quickly spread the disease to humans. In 1347, Italian sailors recently returning from China brought the plague to Italy, and from there it quickly spread throughout Europe. Though the disease became dormant in the winters (its flea hosts were not around in the cold), it always came back with full force every summer. The disease didn’t disappear completely until the 1600s. Since there weren’t any medicines to combat the disease, no one stood a chance against it. Those few who did survive benefited greatly with increased wages and resources (“The Black Death”).

There are three different types of plague: bubonic, septicemic, and pneumonic. When infected by the parasite carrying the bubonic plague, the lymph nodes become swollen and painful. These infected lymph nodes are called bubos and can inflate up to 10 cm. Other symptoms include sudden fever and chills, muscle aches, fatigue and headache.

The septicemic plague involves the blood stream, but can be a complication of the bubonic strain. Symptoms include fever and chills, shock, oral, nasal or rectal bleeding, abdominal pain, diarrhea and vomiting, and gangrene (death and blackening of tissue) in the extremities. The plague we know as the Black Death was a septicemic plague that developed as a complication of a bubonic strain.

The final type, pneumonic, is the rarest, but the deadliest. You can only contract this strain through inhaling contaminated particles. Besides fever, weakness, nausea and vomiting, victims also display symptoms of pneumonia. These symptoms include chest pain, difficulty breathing, and a bloody cough (“Plague”).


THE VIRGIN QUEEN

Queen Elizabeth I was born on September 7, 1533 to King Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn, his second wife. Her father was very upset by her birth, as he had divorced his first wife, Katherine of Aragon, after she gave birth to his daughter Mary. Henry was only interested in having a boy, as he needed an heir to his throne. He later falsely accused Elizabeth’s mother Anne of adultery and had her beheaded in 1536. He went on to marry 4 more times before his death in 1547. After her younger brother’s death, her Catholic older sister Mary ascended the throne and was nicknamed “Bloody Mary” because of her persecution and execution of thousands of Protestants. When Protestant Elizabeth took the throne in 1558, at the age of 25, the reign of terror ended. Elizabeth absolutely refused to marry during her 44 year reign, and never had an heir of her own. This uncertainty in the line of succession made Elizabeth vulnerable to many assassination attempts. Elizabeth’s reign has been called “The Golden Age” of England, as in her time she kept the country stable, both politically and religiously, defeated the unsinkable Spanish Armada in 1588, and along with her successor James I, helped make the greatness of playwright William Shakespeare possible. Elizabeth died on March 24, 1603.

There were two major religions during the Elizabethan era—Catholicism and Protestantism. Both of these are types of Christianity, and are very similar, but the followers of both rarely got along. After the Reformation of the 1500s, different groups began to break away from the Catholic Church. The strongest one of these sects was Protestantism. The main grievances the Protestants had with the Catholics were their greed (they sold pieces of paper that guaranteed admittance into Heaven) and their idolatry (worshipping the saints and the Pope, not just God). But this was not a time of religious freedom. In fact, whatever religion the king or queen adhered to was the one the country was expected to follow, and not doing so often lead to torture and death. Queen Mary I, Elizabeth I’s older sister, was a very strict Catholic, and her blatant and unmerciful persecution of the Protestants earned her the nickname “Bloody Mary.” The Protestant Queen Elizabeth I tried to change things by adopting a tolerant attitude towards the Catholics, but the Church continued to plot against her and some of her subjects went after Catholics anyway (“Religion”).

Aside from all the religious talk, many Elizabethans also strongly believed in Fate and the power of the stars. Their study of the stars, or Astrology, played a major influence in the lives of the people. Many believed that by following the stars, they could predict the future. This is where Nostradamus made his predictions, and when horoscopes were invented. Another popular thing was alchemy, the belief that metals could be turned into gold and the elixir of life could be discovered. William Shakespeare believed whole-heartedly that the stars controlled your fate, and incorporated this element in all of his plays, most notably in *Romeo and Juliet*, where the young couple are described as “star-crossed lovers” (“Elizabethan Astrology”).


Elizabethan times fell during the Renaissance, a time of great renewal in education. Because of this, many advancements were made in all areas of science. For many centuries, the world believed the sun revolved around the earth. However, both Copernicus and Galileo found overwhelming evidence that the earth actually revolved around the sun. These findings got them both in trouble with the Church. Galileo also invented the telescope, with which he discovered 4 of Jupiter’s moons, Venus’s phases, and the fact that the Milky Way is made of separate stars. Kepler’s work with orbits paved the way for Isaac Newton to discover gravity. The scientific method, the experimental process still used to this day, was also created during this time.

With all these advancements in science, you would think the world of medicine would have been quite advanced. However, this was still a crude science and many people suffered unnecessarily because of it. As sanitation was non-existent, many people fell ill with simple infections, and the rudimentary precautions doctors took were the only things that saved them from the same fate. The Humors, or body fluids, were thought to cause or curb all diseases, so bleeding and leeches were popular prescriptions. Herbal remedies were also popular. If your tooth hurt, you had to have it pulled, and there was no such thing as anesthesia. The most frequent illnesses were infections, complications due to child birth, and the Bubonic Plague, to which there was no cure. There were several different types of medical professionals at the time. Midwives delivered babies, Apothecaries dispensed medicines, Barbers pulled teeth, Surgeons performed operations, and Physicians were the most highly respected professionals.

THE SHAKESPEARIAN CATALOG

William Shakespeare is responsible for a large collection of work, and some of the greatest literature of all time. His works ranged from poetry to several types of plays. Shakespeare wrote 154 sonnets, and his particular pattern- 3 quatrains and a couplet, with the ABABCCDEDEFGG rhyme scheme- became its own style of sonnet. Sonnets 1-126 were addressed to a young, wealthy man whom some speculate was Shakespeare’s good friend, and some feel was more than that. Sonnets 127-154 were addressed to the “Dark Lady,” who was most certainly Shakespeare’s lover (Cummings). Shakespeare’s plays can be divided into three categories: Comedies, Tragedies, and Histories. Shakespeare wrote 17 comedies, including The Taming of the Shrew (1593), Much Ado About Nothing (1598), and Midsummer’s Night Dream (1595), about three couples and the games a fairy king and his servant play on them. He also wrote 10 tragedies, including Macbeth (1611), Julius Caesar (1600), and Romeo & Juliet (1594), about two kids from rival families who fall in love and eventually kill themselves when they cannot be together. Shakespeare finally wrote 10 histories, including King Henry V (1598), King Richard II (1600), and King Henry VIII (1612), about the legendary king of England and his many wives (Merriman).

THE BARD OF AVON

William Shakespeare is known as one of the greatest writers in history. His only rival for sales is the Bible. Shakespeare was born in 1564 in Stratford-upon-Avon. Though his birth date was never recorded, he was baptized on April 26, 1564. His parents were John Shakespeare, a local businessman, and Mary Arden. William was their first child, though they later had three more boys. Shakespeare attended King’s New School, a grammar school, starting at age eleven. At eighteen, he married Anne Hathaway, with whom he had three children- Susanna, and twins Hamnet and Judith. Shakespeare always showed an affinity for the theatre, and worked at the Globe Theatre in London in the Queen’s Men acting company. Starting in 1593, when the plague was at its worst in London, Shakespeare is thought to have traveled around, writing, before joining the Lord Chamberlain’s Men, whom he stayed with until his death. When James I became king, he took this acting company under his wing and renamed them the King’s Men. James’ patronage allowed Shakespeare the time to write many of his plays. Shakespeare died on April 23, 1616 and was buried in the Holy Trinity Church in Stratford-upon-Avon. Though his cause of death is not known, it is thought that he died of some kind of fever, possibly brought on by a sexually transmitted disease. His epitaph on his grave reads:

“Good friend for Jesus sake forbear
To digg the dust encloased heare
Blessed be y man y spares hes stones
And curst be he y moves my bones” (Merriman)

Everything written here is a mixture of record and speculation, as the records of Shakespeare’s life are few and far between, and there are even rumors that the man born in Stratford was not the man responsible for the vast collection of plays and poems we now know him for. Those rumored to be the real Shakespeare include the Earl of Oxford, the Earl of Essex, and even Queen Elizabeth (Mabillard). Unless some as yet undiscovered historical document turns up, we will never know the truth.